

Peer-review report of

Horgan, J. & Shayler, M. (2026). Why the 'salad bar of ideologies' does not help us understand contemporary violent extremism. *advances.in/psychology*, 1, e607682.

<https://doi.org/10.56296/aip00057>

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Round 1

Editor

Date: 2026-04-29

Dear Authors,

Thank you for submitting your manuscript, "From A Thousand Islands to a Hidden Valley: Critically Appraising the 'Salad Bar' of Ideologies," for consideration in our special issue, *Advances in the Psychology of Violent Extremism*. We have now received feedback from two reviewers with core expertise in this area. We are grateful for their exceptionally thorough and constructive evaluations, which should help you further improve an already strong paper. As is standard for this journal, we assessed the manuscript independently before reading the evaluations.

We all have very positive things to say about the work. For instance, Reviewer 1 states that they "consider the manuscript to be a key contribution to the field at a critical point where the notion of 'salad bar'-extremism unfortunately goes largely unchallenged in the academic and public debate". They also applaud that you "provide a very timely and comprehensive review of the concept (and related terms) and the trends within different extremist groups and actors it is supposed to describe – an overview which itself is much needed!" Similarly, Reviewer 2 states, "I would like to commend you, this is a very relevant topic in the contemporary extremism research... You are synthesizing a tremendous amount of research, and this will no doubt be a helpful introduction and theoretical basis for future researchers." There is clearly enthusiasm for your manuscript, which we share.

At the same time, the reviewers' comments and our independent assessment identify several issues that must be addressed before the manuscript can be considered for publication. We would therefore like to invite you to revise your manuscript in light of both the reviewers' feedback and our own assessment. Rather than reiterating all points in detail here, we encourage you to engage carefully with the full reviews below. In the following sections, we summarize and synthesize what we consider to be the most central issues.

Reviewer 1 is generally convinced by the quality of your manuscript but requests that some arguments are strengthened. They suggest answering not just how but "why NVE may be a preliminary conceptual alternative to salad bar extremism," and recommend literature that could be helpful. They also suggest providing a brief overall definition of the salad bar phenomenon. We acknowledge that this could be difficult precisely due to the various terms and definitions circulating, but perhaps there is a way to provide an overarching definition up front that encompasses most of them. We also suggest adding a column to Table 1 defining the term in accordance with the relevant reference, and a second column noting whether it is provided by a scholar, practitioner, or other entity (as the Reviewer suggests). The table could be presented in landscape format to allow for the necessary space, and the current reference column could cite the author rather than providing the full reference (which then is rather provided in the reference section). Finally, we suggest revising the title of your manuscript. It is important to include the term violent extremism, and the title should convey the paper's main statement more clearly. While we

appreciate the creative metaphor, we do not think it benefits the impact of the paper. We suggest the title: “Why the ‘salad bar’ fails to explain violent extremism: conspiracy and online ecosystems.”

Reviewer 2 also makes highly valuable recommendations. For instance, they suggest restructuring the manuscript to clearly distinguish two separate aspects of salad bar ideology: the merging of extremist groups into hybrid ideologies and the individual practice of mixing disparate beliefs. Separating these concepts would be beneficial because they carry different research conclusions and policy implications.

The manuscript makes the strong claim that “salad bar” extremism overstates novelty and that most of what is observed reflects “long-standing variations” in extremist behavior. The examples provided in support are real precedents. However, the comparison appears asymmetric in a way that weakens the argument. The cases cited are predominantly organizational-level strategic alliances, whereas the contemporary cases used to illustrate “salad bar” extremism are largely individual-level phenomena, such as lone actors constructing personal ideological hybrids from online subcultural material. These are structurally different processes. Strategic inter-organizational alliances between groups with divergent ideologies are not equivalent to individuals constructing eclectic worldviews from online sources. Although the manuscript briefly acknowledges this distinction, it does not follow through on its implications. As a result, the evidence used to argue against novelty does not directly address the individual-level, digitally mediated form of ideological mixing that is central to the contemporary phenomenon. The novelty critique therefore rests on a category mismatch that remains unresolved.

Reviewer 2 further notes that personal setbacks often act as catalysts for radicalization. Driven by personal frustration rather than sincere ideological dedication, these individuals selectively mix and match extremist beliefs that best serve their emotional needs. This behavior primarily illustrates motivated reasoning and post-hoc justification, which could strengthen your arguments.

Building on this point, we believe that one of the manuscript’s most interesting implicit claims—that ideology in many “salad bar” cases functions as post-hoc rationalization rather than primary motivation—is not yet fully developed theoretically. This creates an important gap in the argument. If ideology is post-hoc rationalization, the question becomes: rationalization of what? While the manuscript gestures toward a form of violence-seeking as primary, it does not specify what drives this orientation independent of ideology. Existing work in the field could be helpful here. For example, Olivier Roy’s work may provide a useful starting point for conceptualizing the primacy of violence over ideology.

Relatedly, the manuscript argues that in many cases ideology may be secondary to a primary orientation toward violence. While we agree with this premise, the manuscript does not provide a sufficiently developed theoretical account of what is primary. The most developed framework addressing this issue in contemporary radicalization research is Kruglanski and colleagues’ 3N model (Needs, Narrative, Network). As we are sure you are aware, this model conceptualizes violent extremism as driven by a quest for personal significance, often arising from perceived

humiliation, failure, or loss of meaning, with ideology providing the narrative justification. Integrating this framework would directly strengthen the manuscript's core argument and provide clearer theoretical grounding.

The reviewer also recommends foregrounding the technological changes that may have led to the phenomena researchers and practitioners currently experience. If it is of interest, our recent review may help explain how online environments can lead to relatively “individual” forms of violent extremism. While there is absolutely no requirement to cite this work, our recent framework or the work cited within it may prove useful in this regard: <https://doi.org/10.1177/10888683261430089>.

In addition, while the manuscript identifies “changing online ecosystems” as a primary driver of ideological hybridization and attributes significant explanatory weight to this claim, the underlying causal mechanism remains underspecified. The manuscript moves from the observation that online environments increase access to diverse ideological material to the conclusion that this leads individuals to construct eclectic belief systems, without sufficiently addressing the distinction between selection and causation. It remains unclear whether individuals predisposed to ideological fluidity (e.g., due to personality traits, grievance profiles, or identity instability) are simply more visible in online spaces, or whether these environments actively produce such fluidity in individuals who would otherwise not exhibit it. Clarifying this mechanism would strengthen the explanatory coherence of the argument.

Like Reviewer 2, we also had difficulties “parsing out your meaning in your section about ideology vs motivation.” We believe the clarity of your arguments in this section can be improved. Reviewer 2, similar to Reviewer 1, gently pushes back on the NVE explanation. They argue that “it seems to be akin to a contemporary rebirth of anarchism mixed with complete social/individual despair brought about by the seemingly hopeless state of affairs (global pandemics, dire economic inequality, surging unemployment and debt, an emerging political gender gap, climate change, wars, etc).” You are already quite careful when suggesting this alternative, but there is likely space to develop it further.

Additional Editorial Points

In addition to the reviewers' comments, please address a few additional points.

Regarding related literature, research demonstrates that various (even contradictory) conspiracy beliefs are correlated. Incorporating this could support your argument that a latent factor connects ideas seemingly belonging to distinct ideological streams (e.g., <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12518>, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-022-25617-0>).

When discussing the link between conspiracy theories and extremism, competing predictions presented in a recent nuanced book chapter may be helpful (see <https://osf.io/download/emgjf>).

In the opening paragraphs of the section “Are We (Incorrectly) Assuming This is a New Phenomenon?” we ask that you provide more historical examples to substantiate your arguments.

Furthermore, the current conclusion mixes recommendations with a summary. Please separate these into a dedicated recommendations section and a distinct conclusions section. We believe a Delphi type of consensus approach could be ideal for converging the different definitions; this might be a valuable avenue to suggest for future work. Generally, please ensure you suggest empirical avenues that could help bring clarity to the field. Finally, it would be highly beneficial to explicate some of your core recommendations directly in the abstract.

STYLISTIC

- Please address the following stylistic and formatting issues.
- First, there is an editing artifact that needs removal: “[IRA, other examples in here too].”
- Please ensure page numbers are provided for all direct quotes, as you mostly do (e.g., on page 5 when quoting Paige Pascarelli).
- Additionally, provide a publication year for the following reference: “Gartenstein-Ross and colleagues observed that different terms are sometimes used interchangeably to capture a wide spectrum of cases, suggested to refer to anything from fullblown conversion to a new ideology, to the borrowing of symbols or language without any meaningful adoption of that ideology.”
- Correct the typographical errors in “...the apparent increased in this ideological confusion.” and “A clinical team in Montreal, Canada, have observed...”
- Please insert the missing word in bracketed text to ensure grammatical correctness here: “These issues warrant a more extensive consideration, but for now, we concur with Norris (p.5) that while “motives and ideologies are often conflated but should be analytically separated.””
- Delete the extraneous word in “Jesse Norris unpacks proposes multiple additional terms...”
- Additionally, add the missing full stop after “...of far-right extremists (Weimann et al., 2025)” and add the missing word in “There are different ways in which can do this, not least via some terminological housecleaning.”
- In the text “McKenzie & O’Brien’s (2024) analysis”, please replace the ampersand with the word “and.”
- Please entirely avoid contractions such as “isn’t” and “let’s”.
- Provide the missing year in “On this issue, we strongly concur with Gartenstein-Ross et al.”
- Finally, please do not use italics for entire quotes, though emphasizing specific words is perfectly acceptable.

REFERENCES / CITATIONS

There are several issues with the references and citations, including incorrect years and missing entries. Please upload your document to our free reference checker at <https://apa.advances.in>.

This tool will help you identify many of these issues. Please resolve them and upload the document again to verify the changes. Note that the program is probabilistic and in beta mode, meaning some false positives will occur; however, it correctly detects anomalies in the majority of cases (often even caused by small inconsistencies in punctuation etc.).

In summary, the manuscript provides a thought-provoking analysis of an important topic and is highly suitable as a perspectives paper for this special issue. We believe that addressing the issues highlighted in this review will elevate the paper over the threshold for publication. When submitting your revision, please provide excerpts exemplifying your changes in the response letter, along with a version of the document with tracked changes. To facilitate the rapid publication of this important work, we would appreciate receiving your revision by May 29.

Best regards,

Jonas R. Kunst and Milan Obaidi

Reviewer 1

This is a peer review report of the manuscript entitled “From a Thousand Islands to a Hidden Valley: Critically Appraising the ‘Salad Bar’ of Ideologies” submitted to *Advances in Psychology*.

Summary of paper

The manuscript first introduces the recently articulated increase in what appears to be a ‘blurring’, ‘blending’, or ‘mixing’ of extremist ideologies traditionally viewed as distinct from one another – an increase captured by the notion of a “salad bar of ideologies”. Second, the manuscript provides a comprehensive review of the plethora of terms related to the ‘salad bar’-phenomenon and their meanings, which thirdly leads to a review of developments with certain extremist communities and offender types which have spawned the ‘salad bar’-terms. Fourth, acknowledging novel developments within violent extremism and the challenge of addressing ideological ‘mixing’ or ‘hopping’ from the perspective of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), the authors argue that while gaining scholarly and practical traction, the ‘salad bar’-phenomenon hardly seems new, e.g. by showing how it is related to several recurring themes within conspiracy theory beliefs and conspiratorial thinking, polarization, and misinformation, and the role of digital environments. From here, the fifth and final main section raises questions and challenges related to the salad bar-term, e.g. contemplating whether the phenomenon has occurred due to a conflation between ideology and motivation, incorrect assumptions about its novelty, and relating it to other emerging trends with violent extremism, specifically nihilism and accelerationism. The authors conclude that “the ‘salad bar’ term is unhelpful, imprecise, and conceptually dubious, conflates multiple distinct and overlapping processes, and overstates novelty while simultaneously failing to acknowledge what is new and what has changed regarding the context to violent extremism” (p. 21), calling for e.g. alternative language and typologies to capture particularly ‘mixed motives’ of violent extremist action.

Overall assessment of the manuscript

I first want to commend and thank the authors for addressing a highly relevant and important topic within radicalization, extremism, and terrorism research, and P/CVE. Overall, I consider the manuscript to be a key contribution to the field at a critical point where the notion of 'salad bar'-extremism unfortunately goes largely unchallenged in the academic and public debate. In my view, the authors provide a very timely and comprehensive review of the concept (and related terms) and the trends within different extremist groups and actors it is supposed to describe – an overview which itself is much needed! Likewise, the authors do well in showcasing how the mechanisms central to the 'salad bar'-phenomenon (i.e. 'mixing', 'blurring', 'hopping', or 'convergence' between seemingly distinct ideologies, whether strategic or fusion-based, or at the individual or organizational level) themselves are not necessarily new as they mirror traditional radicalization mechanisms – although these mechanisms may have different opportunity structures in emerging online contexts. I likewise consider section five to address important avenues for future research and P/CVE, particularly clearing up the role of ideology as more than motivation, tackling the currently unchallenged assumptions of 'salad bar' ideologies, and linking it to broader trends in the radicalization landscape. Although I do have some reservations about the authors' (as I read it) tentative and cautious promotion of nihilistic violent extremism (NVE) as a conceptual alternative (more on this below), I want to commend the authors for addressing these issues themselves.

These contributions withstanding, it is my assessment that the authors can strengthen the manuscript even further before it is ready for publication in *Advances in Psychology*. I therefore recommend the authors revise the manuscript following the comments below. Importantly, I want to stress that all my comments below are suggestions for how to further improve what I consider to be an already strong and important manuscript. I hope the authors find them useful in their work.

Suggestions for improving the manuscript

My first suggestion for improving the manuscript concerns a point the authors raise themselves: whether the concept of NVE is the best suited to describe phenomena that previously have been labelled as salad bar extremism. Again, I want to commend the authors for being aware of the limitations of their own argument: "Though whether NVE itself as a label is currently falling victim to some of the same issues that surrounded the 'salad bar' is certainly debatable" (p. 20). Nevertheless, it is my assessment that the manuscript could benefit from a more detailed argument as to *why* NVE may be a preliminary conceptual alternative to salad bar extremism. Part of this argument could include literature on related concepts within the radicalization literature, e.g. generic extremism (Ozer & Bertelsen, 2018) anti-government extremism (Bjørge & Braddock, 2022; Jackson, 2022), as well as the political violence literature, e.g. anti-establishment orientations (Uscinski et al., 2021) and the Need for Chaos (Petersen et al., 2023).

Second, I encourage the authors to make some more explicit conceptualizations earlier in the manuscript. For instance, in the introduction on page 2, somewhere before the table, I suggest

including a brief overall definition of the 'salad bar'-phenomenon in addition to the quote by Wray on page 1: i.e. a definition that captures the generic characterization underlying the phenomenon and related concepts in Table 1. A potential solution could be the description by Gartenstein-Ross et al. as an "amalgamation of disparate beliefs" (2023, p. 1), but I will let the authors decide which definition they find best suited (and argue why). Similarly, I also recommend the authors to provide an explicit definition of violent extremism or extremist ideologies. To some readers within the radicalization research field, this may seem unnecessary. However, given that extremism, and particularly the 'salad bar'-phenomenon are highly interdisciplinary, I find it important considering the links the authors themselves make to adjacent phenomena, e.g. conspiracy theories and polarization. For instance, when reading through the list of concepts in Table 1, it is not entirely clear to me how 'Conspiracy Smoothie' constitutes an example of 'salad bar'-extremism. Although there are empirical links between conspiracy theories and violent extremism, aren't they conceptually distinct? (Douglas & Sutton, 2023). This point also relates to the previous about NVE: does NVE represent an amalgamation of seemingly different extremist ideologies – or rather a novel, yet unique, distinct extremist orientations as some suggest also is the case for e.g. anti-government extremism and misogynistic extremism. From my perspective, both cases could be made – my point here is that the authors address such questions through an explicit definition of what violent extremism – or a violent extremist ideology, narrative, worldview etc. – is.

Third, although it can be derived from the source reference, I would like the authors to make a brief comment about where all the terms listed in Table 1 originate from. That is, are they mainly developed by P/CVE professionals, politicians, or researchers? Or a mix? And what are the implications of their origin for how they are used? Part of this could also inform a slightly broader discussion on how we as researchers (should) approach novel concepts in a field that often is biased towards "emerging threats" (see e.g. Schuurman, 2020).

Fourth, I suggest the authors to consider including the concept of "terrok" in the analysis (i.e. both Table 1 and the subsequent review of concepts). According to Kron et al., (2015) the concept denotes "the fusion of a classical *terrorist* and *amok* runner, is a single perpetrator – like a lone wolf – but creates his own ideological interpretations based on already existing radical ideologies or by deviating from and sometimes even overstating these." (p. 133). I believe the emphasis on individually created ideologies inspired by existing extremist beliefs fits quite well with the 'salad bar'-phenomenon – but note that the paper on "Terrok" was published 5 years before Christopher Wray's statement. So, as the authors argue, what indeed is novel about 'salad bar' ideology?

Fifth, I suggest the authors to take another look at the length of sections 4 and 5.2, which currently seem a bit (too) long. Downsizing these sections will also make it easier to incorporate the suggestions mentioned above.

Finally, and I feel slightly awkward saying this, I do not follow the first part of the title. I suggest the authors use it more actively in the main text, or perhaps change (whatever they think most

appropriate)

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to read this manuscript!

References mentioned in this review report

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Reviewer 2

Comments to the Author:

This paper evaluates the available research on “salad bar” extremism, including research from multiple disciplines (criminology, sociology, linguistics, computer science, etc). Before any critiques,

I would like to commend you, this is a very relevant topic in the contemporary extremism research. You have taken a huge body of literature and attempted to make it a sensible steppingstone for future research. You are synthesizing a tremendous amount of research, and this will no doubt be a helpful introduction and theoretical basis for future researchers.

That said, I have one large theoretical gripe that I think you must address before publishing:

There are at least 2 separate issues related to “salad bar” ideology: 1) the convergence of formerly distinct extremist ideologies/groups (IE increased collaboration and similarities between many far-right groups) and the emergence of “hybrid” ideologies, such as the Proud Boys which is a simultaneously misogynist, racist, and nationalist ideology and 2) the ideological promiscuity of individual actors who “shop” for elements that suit them, even if this seems incoherent to an outside audience. I think that these concepts should be carefully divided in your paper because the research on these topics has reached different conclusions and policy recommendations. Though this is ultimately your decision, I would suggest that you may benefit from restructuring the paper to focus on these two separate issues and their implications. You touch on them repeatedly throughout the paper, but I don’t feel that there is a satisfactory discussion of what makes these two issues different and both of them concerning.

With that said, I have detailed comments on each section, but many can be addressed quickly:

Introduction:

- There are at least 2 separate issues at play here: 1) the convergence of formerly distinct extremist ideologies/groups (IE increased collaboration and similarities between many far-right groups) and the emergence of “hybrid” ideologies, such as the Proud Boys which is a simultaneously misogynist, racist, and nationalist ideology and 2) the ideological promiscuity of individual actors who “shop” for elements that suit them, even if this seems incoherent to an outside audience. I think that these concepts should be carefully divided because the research on these topics has reached different conclusions and policy recommendations.
 - o Looking through your chart of terminology, some of these seem to touch on each of these issues so I think the difference between them needs to be clarified.
 - o I do also question if you should be mixing in sources that appear to be news sources/commentators in your terminology chart. This is more an issue of personal preference, but I will raise it to your attention.
- The Hemmila & Perliger, 2024 paper is a comparison of multiple far-right groups that seeks to identify whether the groups have similar ideological traits, it does not in any way measure individual-level activity. Their findings ultimately showed little convergence/similarities between the groups, especially in their adversarial discourse (as you note later in the paper).
- You mention that we’re seeing less ideologically coherent actors. I would suggest that this is the product of the decline of traditional terrorist organizations (at least, in the context of domestic extremism in Western countries) and the rise of online extremist communities. The convenient availability of so many ideologies encourages individuals with personal grievances to self-radicalize, picking and choosing elements of multiple extremist streams.

o There is a lot of literature about personal grievances or losses being a trigger for the radicalization process (see Paul Gill's research on lone actors, "bombing alone" etc.). Many people might suffer a seemingly commonplace issue (losing a job, losing a girlfriend, etc) and use that frustration as fuel to adopt an extremist ideology. Because they are not sincerely interested in the groups' grievance, they are able to fuse together whatever elements appeal to them and ideologically "shop around"

Main body:

- I find the structure of the paper a bit confusing after the introduction. You move to areas of fusion (far-right within itself, far-right with incels, far-right with jihadism) but then cut to discussion of lone actors. I find this confusing because many of your examples from the prior three sections are lone actor attacks. Maybe you could have a section about ideologies that have been studied in salad bar research and a next section on the individual and group context of salad bar research.

o "practitioners and analysts are increasingly acknowledging that structured, hierarchical groups are seldom contributing to the attack planning and radicalization of contemporary lone actors (Gilmour, 2024; President of the United States, 2021; Stewart, 2023)"

§ Though they are not contributing resources or directly supervising planning, far-right groups' influence ideologically shouldn't be overlooked. Online forums and platforms make it possible for people to consume extremist content and "engage" with a larger collective with minimal risk. The prominence of lone actor attacks doesn't necessarily mean that these groups are not influencing and encouraging these attacks (albeit indirectly). This is the basis of leaderless resistance, a tactic that the far-right traditionally uses.

o Your conspiracy theory section is very long and somewhat rambling in places. I suggest you streamline this down to a couple of paragraphs focusing on main takeaways, perhaps the spread of conspiracy theories, some popular and long-lasting conspiracies (NWO, Qanon/Pizzagate, etc), and the nexus between conspiracy theories and far-right groups. I think you could make a great argument that the "crisis narratives" of many groups lend themselves to conspiracy theories (IE: "how do we prove that white people are oppressed?" -> "there must be an existential threat to the white race" -> great replacement theory).

§ Sam Jackson has some great work on conspiracy theories in the patriot movement, particularly how they mesh with the far-right. I highly recommend integrating his work because he touches on why conspiracy theories are perfect fuel for extremist groups (they are technically difficult to disprove, they lead to erosion of trust in mainstream news/govt, and they create pathways to new conspiracies).

o You close with a discussion of online spaces. In my opinion, this should be much earlier in the paper and more thorough. The emergence on online spaces and the lack of adequate regulation has undoubtedly changed extremism. This applies both to extremist group-level behaviors and individual radicalization trajectories.

Theoretical/policy implications:

- To be perfectly honest, I am having a very hard time parsing out your meaning in your section about ideology vs motivation. This section, in my interpretation, does not clearly explain

why ideology and motivation are different. You state repeatedly that they are different but you don't actually *tell* the reader why they are different.

o You also have virtually no citations and the citations you do give are quite dated though you say this has been extensively researched. What are you using to guide your discussion here?

o I also must push back on your premise: "We hypothesize that the proliferation of terms associated with ideological confusion is also a tacit acknowledgement of how terrorist motivation appears to be getting more complicated, but we do emphasize that it may only appear that way."

§ It's my interpretation of the literature that "motivations" are relatively stable (in many cases these are personal grievances; breakups, lost job, lonely, etc); but "ideology" the larger meaning, purpose, movement, or political "vision" for the violence is becoming more complex.

- I agree that on an individual level "motives" and "ideology" are different. However, based on J.M. Berger's model of extremism, "extremist ideology" encompasses a political motivation and/or desired outcome from the use of violence. I question if this section about motives vs ideology is necessary in this paper.

- I really like section 5.2 as it is. I don't have any substantial critiques and I think this is a really important question in the ongoing salad bar research.

- While I agree that nihilistic violence is a new trend, I think it's a stretch to compare the past 10ish years of lone actors exhibiting "salad bar" ideologies to NVE. NVE is, in my view, a new subcategory of online extremism that appears to be distinct from other ideological streams. Based on the research I have seen, it seems to be akin to a contemporary rebirth of anarchism mixed with complete social/individual despair brought about by the seemingly hopeless state of affairs (global pandemics, dire economic inequality, surging unemployment and debt, an emerging political gender gap, climate change, wars, etc).

- I like your conclusions and policy recommendations.

Round 2

Editor

Date: 2026-06-10

Dear Authors,

Thank you for addressing the issues identified in the previous round of reviews. The paper is now at the level we envisioned for our special issue and we believe it will receive considerable attention.

Congrats on a important contribution to the field!

Best,

Jonas R. Kunst & Milan Obaidi